



# Matisse

FAUVE PERIOD

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METHUEN



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# MATISSE

FAUVE PERIOD

BY

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The violent outcry which greeted certain paintings exhibited at the Paris Salon d'Automne in October 1905, and immediately dubbed "Fauves"\*; can only be compared to the scandals caused by Delacroix' *Massacre de Chio*, Manet's *Olympia*, and the smoky railway-stations of Monet. All the founders of Fauvism were present: Matisse, accompanied by the subtle Marquet; the boisterous Vlaminck and his cultured companion, Derain; Puy and Manguin, who hovered on the periphery of the movement; and that extremist cohort's youngest recruit, Othon Friesz. Two more citizens of Le Havre, Braque and Dufy, still in their early twenties, had also joined in; while Van Dongen had been adopted from the outset as a dazzlingly gifted precursor and harmonist.

Fauvism, as a collective phenomenon, was as short-lived as it was violent. Most of the artists who slashed their canvases with pure colours soon drifted away from it, like young

\* The expression originates from a remark made by a critic on seeing a small bronze in the Florentine style in a room full of such pictures—"Donatello parmi les fauves" ("Donatello among the wild beasts").



men getting married after they have sown their wild oats. Only Matisse persisted along the revolutionary course. For revolutionary it was, and people realized it. The conservative press saw in Fauvism the artistic counterpart of the anarchists' bombs. (Gide, on the other hand, found it too rational.) At any rate, one thing was certain: Fauvism was going to blow up the Great Tradition.

This was only partly true. To be sure, a *fauve*, a wild beast, was let loose, but it had already been roaring for some time behind bars, within the School of Paris itself. It had been reared there, and now it escaped. The warm sands of Delacroix had given it birth, it had grown strong in the sunlight and open air of Impressionism, and Gauguin and Van Gogh had sharpened its claws. Now it was ready



HARBOUR AT COLLIOURE. LITHOGRAPH. C. 1906.



Henri Matisse

SELF PORTRAIT. BRUSH AND INK. C. 1900.

to achieve what until then it had been unable to do. The Gordian knot of perspective was cut, colour was liberated from local tone, and light henceforth "expressed by a harmony of intensely coloured surfaces."

The evolution of the Fauvism underlying French painting in the nineteenth century is summarised dramatically by Matisse's own development, from his beginnings up to 1904. His starting-point had been Chardin, Philippe de Champaigne and David de Heim whom he



copied, and from whom he derived a feeling for firm compositions and solidly built masses which he kept even after he had begun to apply paint in flat, unmodelled expanses. His palette, however, dark at the outset, gradually becomes lighter. A secret fire devours it from within, then bites its way to the surface in incandescent trails, and finally bursts out freely. This progress makes Matisse touch, in turn, upon the light dapples of Impressionism, and the would-be cheerful, confetti effects of Seurat, Signac, and of his friend, Cross.



NUDE SEATED ON FLOOR, LEANING ON ONE  
HAND. C. 1910.

Matisse's characteristics as a Fauve? Two, above all others, stand out at once: distortion of line and pure colour, i.e., distortion of tone. Both are simply means toward the same end: he takes a subject not in order to record it, as was commonly done at the time, but in order to transfigure it. In other words, the painting must not *recall* an individual or a past event, but *present* it. The artist no longer attempts to recapture a yesterday: he allows himself to be captured by the current moment.

It is in this context that distortion of line and colour must be viewed: "Take a rectangular sheet of paper and a figure represented by a vertical line. This vertical line will produce an entirely different impression if the paper is held horizontally. In either case, a reconstruction must be effected. It is possible to sacrifice a complete representation, simply retaining one line which is sufficient to render the object." That is to say: no one element of our life or of our work exists independently of the influence of all the other elements, whether opaque or fluid, which surround it. Matisse is merely stating that the draughtsman's hand must become responsive to these surroundings. And he is also saying that only in so doing will the painter be able to prevent the true nature of the object represented from being obscured. For it is not through immutability that a living thing maintains its continuity, but through its ability to adapt itself constantly to change: the boat which cannot ride the waves is fated to sink. If that woman's hip bulges, it is only because the corner of the paper or of the canvas

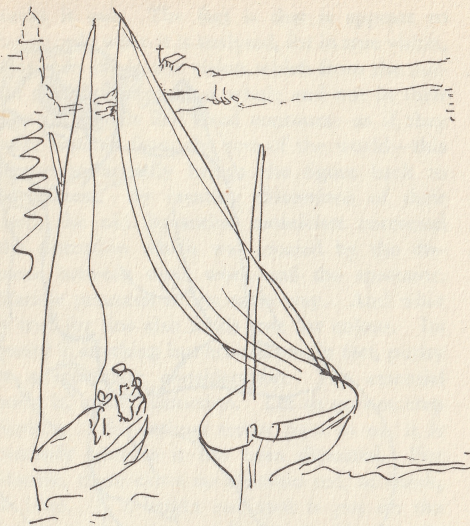


sucks it out. The fact is that it appears to bulge only when it is analysed, for in true vision, that is to say in the vision which from the outset takes in forms as a whole and not in their separate details and fixed contours—as if they were isolated from the rest of the world—this distortion actually brings the figure back to naturalness. By creating distortions of their own, the old Byzantine mosaicists corrected the distortion which was created by the distance between their work and the spectator. Matisse proceeds in the same way. And what is true for line also holds true for colour. Its purity is anything but arbitrary. In fact, purity is a secondary consideration. The essential point is, again, distortion. Let us go one step further: if this colour seems pure to us, it is precisely because it has been distorted. For Matisse, there exists no absolute red, or black, or blue. If a bright red spot is put on the canvas next to an equally bright blue patch, both will lose some of their intensity. The problem is to retain that intensity. The painter's decisive discovery was the realisation that he could achieve this only by daring to change a brush stroke when he had already begun it: by turning it into a green or an orange if necessary. In short, the finished painting will no longer be a *likeness* of the initial spectacle instead, by consenting to move away from it and to relive it, it will capture anew its resonance and freshness. "The form—essential characteristic of the subject—changed according to the reactions of the surrounding coloured surfaces. For the expression arises from the



NUDE SEATED. LITHOGRAPH. 1906.





FISHING BOATS. C. 1905.

coloured surface perceived as a whole by the spectator." Like the Byzantine mosaicist, Matisse learned to submit to the requirements of global vision; after a long period during which he studies and penetrates the object that he wishes to *render*, he allows himself to play—instinctively, it would seem—the game of compensations which will enable him to rediscover the spontaneity and truth of this first vision. His portraits thus continue a tradition ignored and even despised by classic painters,

a tradition that may well have been born in the Fayum, during the first or second century A.D. Some of them display a kinship—a very close one in the case of *Marguerite*—with the frescoes in the Egyptian monastery of Bawit; others lead us towards the realm of the great effigies of Ravenna, a hint of which was already to be found in Van Gogh. By what means? By way of affinities, no more. When Matisse declared that he wanted above all to attain the general and, "so to speak, religious character" of human beings, and asserted that the character of a face in a drawing "depended not on its various proportions but on its spiritual light," he did not necessarily have Byzantium in mind, but he had taken a great step towards it.

Such, then, after a number of important experiments in that direction—begun in Brittany as early as 1894, pursued in Corsica and in Paris, then warmly defined at Saint-Tropez, in 1904, later still mirrored, for ten ardent summers, in the waters of the fishing harbour of Collioure, and finally, after 1912, in Clamart, alternating with compositions marked by their muted atmosphere and darkened colours—such are the works of the major period, 1904-1912: simple forms, frank and lively sonorities. They are light but never frivolous, for their lyric tension lends them substance. It is no longer the convention of modelling but the painter's energy itself that gives them body.

But if that energy subsides, this kind of painting risks falling into triviality. We sometimes sense that threat overhanging certain of Matisse's canvases, after the First World War. Not





STUDY. C. 1905-1910.

that his talent weakens; on the contrary, it knows no obstacles henceforth. That is precisely the trouble: where there is no resistance, energy finds it difficult to declare itself. Hence the temptation to let forms soar effortlessly on the exquisite wings of colour. Matisse notices the peril and reacts against it. "You gave me your mud and I turned it into gold." In order not to transmute the mud into gold too easily, Matisse increases the mud-content. That is: he forces himself to render the volume of objects while still, at the same time, trying to endow them with lyric breath. And in that conflict he often reverts to the rough and moving vein of the preceding years.

Although, in those days, he sometimes allowed himself to be seduced by his own immense talent, let us not forget that as late as 1947-1948

—he was then over seventy—he was still capable of rediscovering, by a desperate affirmation of the will, the principles which he had upheld in the hazardous interlude of Fauvism, properly speaking. And even though, in his gouaches and paper cut-outs and in his ceramics and stained-glass windows, he seems content to be little more than the wonderful painter of the Thousand And One Days, he who, in the words of the Evangelist, "came as a witness to bear witness to light," seemingly indifferent to the problems of space which, once upon a time, had made him risk his all, let us remember that space was no longer a problem, since it was now provided by real walls. His are decorative paintings, not pictorial decorations.

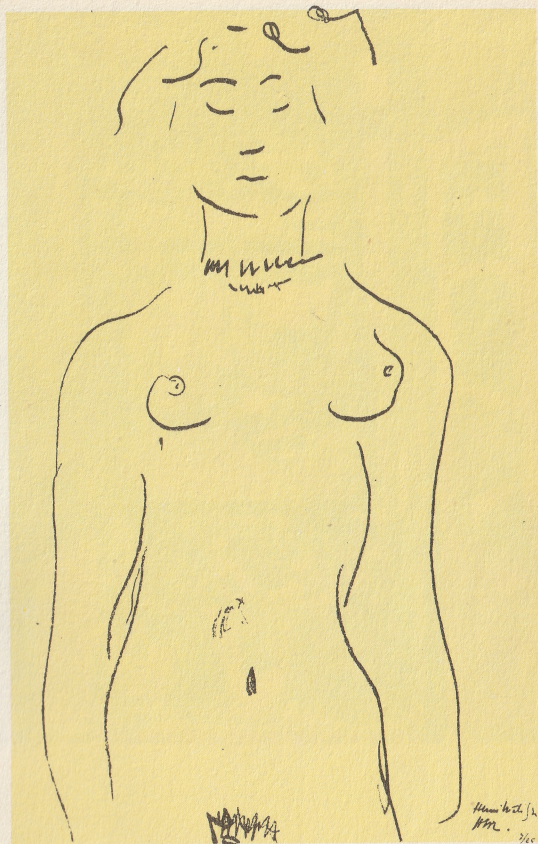
In the end, and particularly in this fiery Indian summer of his gift, Matisse remained faithful to the aims of his heroic years. At all events we can say that the works which most strikingly illustrate these principles are precisely the works of this period. They explain and shed light on the periods that preceded and followed them. It is to them that we shall always have to return.

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